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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 SARAJEVO 000226

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: BOSNIA - REIS'ING TOWARD TROUBLE

REF: A. (A) SARAJEVO 40

[1](#)B. (B) SARAJEVO 103

Classified By: DCM Judith Cefkin, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Reis Mustafa Ceric, leader of the Islamic Community (Islamska Zajednica, or IZ) of Bosnia and Herzegovina, has made a series of statements in recent weeks that undermine his long-espoused position as a responsible leader of modern, "European" Islam. When addressing issues of Wahhabi influence in Bosnia or charges of pedophilia by imams, Ceric has consistently offered a knee-jerk reaction of labeling critics "Islamophobes," whether Christian or Muslim, suggesting that such criticism is itself part of a continuing "genocide," and defending the IZ at all costs. While this tactic may play with a segment of the Islamic Community who remain alienated from liberal Muslims, Croats and Serbs alike, the Reis is ultimately destroying his own credibility among moderate Muslims (who we assess make up the vast majority of Bosniaks) and the international community. End Summary.

Ceric Alleges Genocide Victims were "Weak"

[1](#)2. (C) The first instance of Ceric touching off a media firestorm came in reaction to the comments of Catholic Cardinal Vinko Puljic. On a February 4 visit to Georgetown University covered in Bosnian media, Puljic spoke about issues related to inter-religious dialogue in Bosnia, noting that, for his community, dialogue with Muslims who observe Islam in its traditional, moderate, Bosnian form is easier than with those with a "newly-imported Wahhabi mentality." Taking this a step further, Puljic alleged that he seldom speaks about the Wahhabis in Bosnia because "I quickly get threatening letters." (Note: We assess this as an intentional exaggeration, coupled in this and other Puljic speeches with inflated claims of Croat/Catholic difficulties in Sarajevo. End Note.)

[1](#)3. (SBU) Ceric's response to this relatively mild comment was quick and forceful. On February 6, Ceric delivered a sermon in the Bosniak returnee village of Kaljina (a remote area of the Eastern RS which would be unlikely to have any knowledge of Puljic's comments at a Washington conference.) Ceric spoke about Puljic's characterization of "old and new Muslims," telling the crowd "you are old Bosnian Muslims, whom they call desirable, and for whom they say they are sorry, because there are not more of you, and because they dislike the new Muslims, whom they call Wahhabi... It is unacceptable and malicious to spread fear about new Bosnian Muslims... Bosnian Muslims, the old ones, were killed because they were weak, and the new ones, who are ready to protect their honor and freedom, have never, and will never, endanger

anyone's right to life, religion, freedom, property, and honor"

...and Media are Quick to Object

¶4. (SBU) While Cerić's likely intention was a criticism of Puljić, his defense of Wahhabis and characterization of Bosniak victims of genocide as "weak" was immediately condemned by a wide array of local media. RS-based media, as well as Mostar-based dailies and liberal Bosniak press were particularly strident, with FTV news program "60 minutes" said "citizen and politician Mustafa efendi Cerić is brutally abusing his function, and justifies Wahhabi radicalism by the genocide committed on Bosnian Muslims in his sermon." Oslobodjenje, the primary mouthpiece of left-leaning, secular Bosniaks, and long time critic of the Reis, contributed to the media outcry over the course of several days.

Scandal in the Courts Adds Fuel to the Fire

¶5. (C) The Islamic Community's reaction to a different scandal which occurred at the same time has also been problematic. At the same time as the sermon uproar, one Islamic Community imam was on trial in Travnik municipal court on charges of pedophilia. According to unofficial sources, the imam (Resad Omerhodžić) had been engaged in a pattern of sexual abuse of young girls in the village of Gluha Bukovica for a number of years, though only one victim was identified in the court proceedings. Early on in the

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process, 33 imams from throughout Bosnia organized a petition (available at the Rijaset website, www.rijaset.ba) alleging that the parents of the victim (themselves Muslims) were leading a campaign against Islam and the Islamic Community. Further, the petition claimed that Omerhodžić was innocent and the victim (an underage girl) was "a person of low morals."

Crying Children Defend the Perpetrator

¶6. (C) On February 14, when Omerhodžić was convicted of sexual abuse of a minor, crowds of tearful village children surrounded the convicted imam in front of television cameras, in an obviously-orchestrated scene. The usage of children to defend the Omerhodžić before press cameras was later criticized by the BiH Helsinki Citizens' Committee as "a skillfully prepared manipulation of children... representing a violation of their rights." (Note: Embassy contacts allege that the small village had been internally divided for some time on the conduct of this imam, with a portion of the village becoming violently defensive when television crews arrived to interview locals. Rumors have circulated that the imam regularly provided written certification that children were attending his Koranic classes, and that some villagers were able to obtain money from "Wahhabis" when they showed this written proof of attendance. End Note.)

...and the Reis Fumbles Again... and Again

¶7. (C) A series of actions by the Reis turned bad to worse. On the day of the verdict, Cerić met in his Sarajevo offices with Omerhodžić (who remains free pending appeal) and his lawyer, later appearing along with the imam's lawyer at a press conference. Though Cerić said he had suspended the imam pending the final outcome of the case, and respected the decision of the court (a positive move), he later angrily walked out on the press conference he was hosting when reporters grilled him on his support for Omerhodžić. Then, over the following weekend, Cerić met with the victim and her family in Gluha Bukovica. In a private meeting that press microphones managed to catch, Cerić asked the girl if, when

forced to touch Omerhodzic's genitals, she "managed to arouse him," noting this would be severely punishable by Shari'a law. On the same day, Ceric met with the mosque superintendent who had previously threatened a visiting television crew, and prayed together with Omerhodzic. His prior decision to suspend the imam, and respect the court, thus seemed to ring particularly hollow.

Everyone (Who Doesn't Agree) is an Islamophobe

¶8. (SBU) When discussing the case with media during his trip to Gluha Bukovica, Ceric publicly stated that the victim's attorney, Dusko Tomic (a Serb) was "an Islamophobe." In a later interview with "60 minutes," Tomic chose his words carefully, but noted that Ceric had supported Omerhodzic throughout the trial process, rather than the rights of the Muslim girl that was his client. Tomic, responding to charges of "Islamophobia," drew a parallel to the fact that he was also defending a minor abused by a Serb Orthodox priest in Bijeljina, and had been accused there of being a traitor to his own people.

Division within the Islamic Community

¶9. (C) Both the pedophilia case and Ceric's reaction have left Bosnia's Islamic Community deeply divided. One high-placed contact in the community with whom we spoke condemned the actions of Omerhodzic categorically, but equivocated on Ceric's handling of the matter. Our contact suggested errors in handling the Omerhodzic case were the result of lack of public relations acumen (which we assess as absurd when Ceric's media handling over the years is taken into consideration) or alternatively the result of defensiveness, coupled with egoism from a man no longer able to listen to others (which we believe is more likely). Another mid-level contact in the IZ painted a more negative picture of Ceric's actions, saying that the community, despite its show of outward strength, is weak and divided, lacking control over more than a thousand imams, many with little or no understanding of proper conduct in these

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matters. Ceric himself, he said, was a polarizing figure and, while tightly controlling Rijaset public relations, was unable or unwilling to address problems within the community or air "dirty laundry."

Comment

¶10. (C) In a country replete with politically-motivated media, some Bosniaks see a media conspiracy against the Reis. "60 minutes' characterizations of the Reis as "citizen-politician Ceric" and Omerhodzic (before the verdict) as "pedophile-effendi" are particularly strident, especially when considering the government-financed nature of the channel, FTV. However, just as each ethnic group is in the minority somewhere, each religious community has some media biased in favor of (and against) them somewhere. Dnevni Avaz, in particular, offered no negative coverage of any Islamic Community issues throughout the process. Attacks on, and defense of, the Reis are nothing new. Ceric, in fact, jokingly displays in his office a magazine cover featuring his face photo-shopped onto the body of a mujaheddin.

¶11. (C) Ceric's actions of late create a problem for our work at outreach to the Muslims of Bosnia; as a religious leader, Ceric is coming more and more to resemble the polarizing political elite who regularly bang drums of ethnic grievance and reward only personal loyalty over political (or theological, in this case) competence. His connections to shady business dealings, "well-known" on the street but not clearly documented as illegal, add to this growing

resemblance. The "international" Ceric, who writes and speaks on issues of inter-religious harmony and a "European Islam" has not been sighted in some time. If recent events are simply evidence of poor management and flat-footed response, our problem is relatively minor. If, however, the "international" Ceric seen in Brussels, the Vatican, and Washington is gone for good, our problem is much greater. Only time will tell. End Comment.
ENGLISH